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TO SEE GOD

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John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture: John 1:14-18, Job 42:1-6, 10-17

"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you."
Job 42:5(NRSV)

A good man Job is. Living the good life, enjoying his success as a businessman, husband and father. Nothing makes him happier than the health and well-being of his children, their love for him, their love for one another.

What Job doesn't know is that he is the topic of a peculiar discussion in the courts of heaven. He's the main character in a poem written in the sixth century, BCE, one of the most magnificent literary achievements of all time. God and Satan are whiling away the time talking about the phenomenon of human faith. It's God's favorite topic. Satan obviously is a skeptic. "Consider my servant Job," God says, "a good and upright man who lives a moral and just life, loves his family, succeeds at business and on top of it all, believes in me, thanks me, worships me."

"Big deal," Satan says. Who wouldn't believe in a gracious God when business is good, profits are up, you're feeling great, and your children are not only healthy but happy and best of all they like being your children? What could be better? Who wouldn't believe in God? Take it all away and see if Job continues to believe.

And so Job's life disintegrates. His cattle are wiped out, his children killed, he himself is covered with disgusting and embarrassing sores. He loses everything — including his dignity and reputation and finally even the support of his wife who advises him to curse God and die.

But an unexpected thing happens. Job doesn't curse God. Instead Job hangs onto God, believes so much in God that he inundates heaven with his prayers, his pleading, his arguments, demands and anger. It is not what either Satan or God expected, the intensity of Job's faith, even his arguing.

Job will have none of the conventional wisdom that says he must have sinned and is paying the price. Job is not perfect. But he knows in his heart that he has done nothing to deserve this ghastly tragedy. And so his petitions to the courts of heaven increase in intensity.

Finally God answers, out of the whirlwind. And what God says to Job is essentially, I am God and you are not. I am creator of all that is and you are not. On and on God speaks. "Where were you when I shut in the sea and made the clouds and commanded the morning?" It is gorgeous poetry and it leaves the reader, not to mention Job, a little breathless. "Gird up your loins like a man" God says. "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?"

At the end Job speaks directly to the God who has come to him out of the whirlwind.

> "I have uttered what I did not understand ...
> things too wonderful for me."

And then this — the most haunting and intriguing line in the story:

> "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
> but now my eye sees you."

And then God restores to Job everything he has lost — sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys, seven sons, three daughters — and he lives one hundred and forty years more and dies, "old and full of days," and I imagine, still a little perplexed about it all ... and wondering across the years what it was his eye beheld on that day, long ago, when he prayed:

> "I had heard of you, ... but now my eye sees you."

The classic interpretation is that it is a metaphor. After all God was pretty clear on the topic. God told Moses: "You cannot see my face ... no one shall see me and live." [Exodus 33:20] So Job didn't actually "see" God — Job experienced God. What had been a kind of academic abstraction for him, now — after his harrowing journey through the valley of the shadow of death — had become a personal experience ... of God's existence, God's attentiveness, God's compassion. Job, that is to say, knew something he didn't know before — the mystery of the presence of Gc And that apparently is what, finally, he needed.

Job takes us into the presence of the most profound question ever asked, but also into the presence of human experiences which we all share, daily. I began this series on Job last fall, and intended actually to keep returning to the topic during and after the events of Advent and Christmas. But in the middle of it all an event happened that almost destroyed my will to go on. Two friends, Bob and Jean Boling died in a car accident. Bob was a professor at McCormick Theological Seminary. Jean was active locally, nationally and internationally in Middle East peacemaking efforts. Good people. Good friends. Ironically, when I was teaching a class on Job several years ago during Lent, I called Bob and asked for some suggestions and some resources. Job was one of his specialities. He knew a lot about it, was, in fact, working on a book on Job. I still smile at the memory. Professors can be a bit much, sometimes, particularly when you serve them an easy fast-ball, a question about their favorite topic. I knew immediately that I had made a serious mistake. The first delivery was a large and intimidating paper, several hundred pages long, the kind of high academic treatise that has footnotes occupying half of every page in German, Greek, Syrian and Aramaic. I called and thanked him. Bob said he was pleased that I liked the paper, and so more would be on the way. He brought the next installment in the trunk of his car, boxes of papers, books on Job. Finally I had to ask him to stop. It's just a six-session class, I'm not planning to do this exclusively the rest of my life. We laughed — then and every time I saw him afterward. "Have you finished with Job yet?" he always asked me. "No," I would say, "you haven't given me enough material."

He and Jean were on a sabbatical, studying, digging, researching in Israel, Palestine, Jordan. A few days before their scheduled return to Chicago for Christmas, they were killed in Jordan in a head-on collision with a truck.

Job, his favorite topic, gently escorts us into the presence of that kind of senseless tragedy and stays with us as we ask "Why? Why was this necessary? Why Bob and Jean Boling?" And it invites us to stay with the struggle, ask then grieving, then demanding and arguing — and to see, with our own eyes, God.

The theological dilemma, for thoughtful people, is a very real one. How to maintain the tension between the idea of God's mystery and holiness ... the very basis of the Judeo/Christian faith, and the specifically Christian conviction that in Jesus Christ God dwelt among us, that in a sense, to see Jesus is indeed, to see God. God's mystery and hiddenness ... God's nearness and availability.

The trouble with much modern Christianity, theologian Douglas John Hall says, is that it thinks it knows too much. Over the centuries, theology has focused on knowing and understanding God, and has forgotten God's mystery: the simple reality that to be God — God cannot be fully understood by human beings.

Hall calls it the "Triumph of Certitude" and makes the intriguing observation that if we claim to know, understand, see God, we limit God ... and control God, and that says Hall, is exactly what many modern Christians sound like.

Elizabeth Johnson, a Roman Catholic theologian, agrees. In a recent book she writes: "God cannot be measured ... Human beings simply cannot understand God ..." [*She Who Is*, p. 104]

Johnson reminds her readers that it was St. Augustine, centuries ago, who observed "Si comprehendis, non est Deus: if you have understood, then what you have understood is not God."

There is a danger, Professor Johnson says, when preaching and teaching become too clear and ideas too distinct — because we forget the mystery we are dealing with.

When we forget the mystery, when we know the truth absolutely, we become arrogant. The temptation is more than we can resist. There is a battle going on within the culture — it has been called culture wars, and it is also being waged within the churches between those who seek truth and those who know the truth; between those who are open to new configurations and expressions of ancient ideas and those who can tolerate no deviation from truth once delivered. It becomes a heated conflict on occasion ...

On Wednesday night, as it became clear that the Bulls had things in hand, I moved down a few channels and was surprised to see John Dominic Crossan, Professor of Biblical Literature at DePaul, author of a challenging, new book about Jesus. It is controversial, some think blasphemous, and many think wrong — but nevertheless Professor Crossan is a distinguished Christian scholar. When I found him on television, he was sinking lower into his chair, absorbing a withering, relentless barrage of accusations from a huge man who was apparently a conservative evangelical scholar and who was not challenging Crossan's ideas, but at the moment I tuned in condemning him to hell — announcing, with absolute confidence and what appeared like authentic pleasure, that Professor Crossan was going to burn in hell for writing his ideas about Jesus. It embarrassed me. How can he know that? Crossan handled himself admirably. "I would never do to a conservative evangelical what he just did to me. He has stripped me of my faith," he said, rather sadly.

And I thought: he did it in the name of Jesus. And I became angry as I recalled all the ways Christians criticize, attack and malign one another for what they believe or don't believe. I thought about people hounded out of their jobs, people held up to ridicule for the way they believe or teach or lecture or write.

I thought about how absolute certainty and the inevitable arrogance it spawns attracts violent behavior and occasionally even finds a way to rationalize and defend it. You simply cannot call every fetus a baby, every fertilized egg a child, and therefore every abortion a murder without attracting the kind of narrow fanaticism which has now committed murder at women's reproductive health clinics — five times. Is it not time for the rhetoric of arrogant certainty to stop and for people of even minimal goodwill to extend respect to one another? Is it not time, particularly for people who oppose abortion to hold one another accountable on this issue; to condemn violence, but also to stop the arrogant rhetoric of absolute truth and to allow the possibility, the small possibility that truth is larger than any one of us can circumscribe?

What the Christian Church needs is a little theological modesty, a little self-deprecating humor in the middle of our intense representations of the absolute truth of God. What the self-declared judges of us all need is a little less self-confidence and self-importance.

There is a lovely story about Karl Barth, one of the strongest and most influential Christian thinkers since the Reformation, a man not particularly given to gentleness nor charity toward his academic opponents. He told it on himself. Barth's crowning achievement was a 13-volume work called *Church Dogmatics*, 9,185 pages of arduous, tough theology. He imagined himself one day, approaching the gates of heaven to present his life's work — his great theological accomplishment. He imagined the angels laughing at him and saying, "Oh look, here comes poor Karl, huffing and puffing, pushing his wheelbarrow full of 13 big books approaching heaven. He thinks he understands. Isn't he going to be surprised?"

What the Christian enterprise needs is a little theological modesty, a deeper sense of mystery, what my professor and mentor Joseph Sittler called a "precision begotten of deprivation," of not having all the answers ... [*Grace Notes and Other Fragments*, p. 56]

What we need is not more trumpeting of absolute, ultimate truth, but spiritual humility, the kind Elizabeth Johnson means when she says, "Ultimately, the highest human knowledge about God is to know that we do not know." [op. cit., p. 110]

And the world needs it. One of the great saints of our time, Lewis Thomas, a physician, scientist, head of the Sloane Kettering Cancer Clinic, died last year. He wrote wonderfully thoughtful books about science and life and human behavior and without ever claiming religious faith, about ultimate issues. As he grew older, in his last two books, he returned to an intriguing theme — that a sense of mystery and consequent intellectual modesty and humility may be all that can save us. He chose wonderfully provocative titles for his last two books — *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony* and *The Fragile Species.*

The danger to human life is intellectual arrogance that thinks it knows everything, and political and social and racial and ethnic and national absolutism, Thomas taught. "Mine is best — yours is inferior." On that foundation is constructed ethnic hatred, religious warfare, nationalistic arrogance that will risk the life of a city, a nation, the planet to defend its ideology.

His last advice — "Learn from science how little we know, how still less we understand, and how much there is to learn." [*The Fragile Species,* p. 115]

He was most eloquent, I always thought, pondering the mystery of our humanity.

> "If you are looking about for really profound mysteries, essential aspects of our existence for which neither the sciences nor the humanities can provide any sort of explanation, I suggest starting with music. The professional musicologists, tremendous scholars all, for whom I have the greatest respect, haven't the ghost of an idea about what music is, or why we make it and cannot be human without it, or even — and this is the telling point — how the human mind makes music on its own, before it is written down and played." [*Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony,* p. 162]

This religion of ours is based on the conviction that there is a God who is before time, and will be after time, a God whose mystery so impressed our Hebrew forbearers that they did not even pronounce the name of God. This religion of ours is based on the notion that you cannot know God.

What this religion of ours invites us to do is to trust God. To know God, to see God, in this religion of ours, is not comprehending ideas about God — it is a relationship with God, a trusting relatedness, not unlike the way we know one another. Knowing — even your closest, most intimate beloved is never a matter of understanding everything. In fact, if it is love, it is, in fact, a deeper affirmation and appreciation of the mystery, the delectable mystery of the other ...

And so we are invited to trust. To do all the seeing we are capable of by committing our lives, by entrusting our lives to the mystery of God.

Did you happen to read the feature in *Newsweek* about the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz? Elie Wiesel, distinguished novelist who has devoted his literary career to writing about and reflecting on the Holocaust, was a prisoner in Auschwitz with his father.

Wiesel remembers the day of liberation and how he and his father walked out of the camp. His father was to die just two weeks later. Wiesel remembers that day:

> "I recalled the first day, a beautiful sun-soaked day in June. And the happiness — yes, happiness, wretched and pitiable, but happiness nonetheless, for my father and I were in the same unit, and worked in the same detail. So long as he stood at my side, I could live despite it all — despite the barbed wire and dogs, the watchtowers and the SS, the hunger and the fear and the exhaustion ..."
>
> "So long as he stood at my side, I could live."

That, I think, is what Job saw and what he meant when he said,

> "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
> but now my eye sees you."

There is a God who comes out of the whirlwind; a God who stands at our side on the good days and the bad days. Job was not alone. God stood beside him, came to him, cared about him and would never let him go.

That is what Jesus Christ means — God with us ... God sharing our life, our passion, our hopes and fears, even our dying. God with us, inviting our trust.

One hundred years after the birth of Jesus Christ, the author of the fourth Gospel wrote:

> "No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." [John 1:18]

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O God of infinite being, forgive us when we think we know it all. Teach us the modesty of those wise men who fell silently on their knees in the presence of the Christ. Give us the gift of humility so we praise you fully, and know you by trusting your love; in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.